



*From “Wetland Program Development Grants (WPDGs) Case Studies”
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Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection (DEP): *Building consistency
in the way Connecticut’s municipal inland wetland agencies protect wetlands*

Introduction

Connecticut has roughly 450,000 acres of inland wetlands with functions that include providing wildlife habitat, moderating flooding effects, and protecting surface water quality by filtering out pollutants. Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has the primary responsibility of implementing the Inland Wetlands and Watercourses Act, which regulates construction and other activities affecting inland wetlands and watercourses. The DEP is responsible for oversight of each town’s inland wetland agency and ensures all agency regulations conform to the statutes of the Act and DEP regulations. Given Connecticut’s 170 municipal inland wetland agencies, this can be a daunting task.

DEP regulatory authority extends to activities that include filling, dredging, clearing, grubbing, grading, piping, culverting, channelizing, diverting, damming, dewatering, or otherwise altering wetlands and watercourses. Anyone seeking to pursue any of the activities listed above would have to first apply for a permit with the appropriate agency. Applicants including boards of education and municipalities would be directed to the wetlands agency of the town wherein the proposed activity is located. However, state agencies would apply to DEP for permits. Given the breadth of this regulatory program, DEP wanted to ensure that inland wetland agency staff were provided training to maximize consistency in the permitting process.

WPDG Activity

In 1996, DEP received a WPDG to develop a pilot comprehensive training program for Connecticut’s 170 municipal inland wetland agencies, which are charged statutorily with first-line administration of the wetlands regulatory program in the state. Since that time, the training program has been expanded to cover a broad range of issues encompassing the scientific, administrative, and legal aspects of municipal wetlands regulation. Since the municipal inland wetland agencies depend on volunteer commissioners from the community, the level of expertise in science and CT environmental policy varies from person to person. The training is organized in three segments to meet the varying needs and diverse backgrounds of commissioners and staff.

Segment I is designed for new commission members to learn the statutory basis for regulating wetlands and watercourses in Connecticut, the role of municipal inland wetland agencies, and the functions and values of wetlands.

Segment II, intended for all agency staff members, covers new legal issues including a review of pending court cases as well as a discussion of any current legislative issues.

Segment III is tailored to municipal wetland agency staff and experienced commissioners. It explores a wetland related topic in the classroom and the field and has historically been geared toward technical aspects of wetland protection.

Since its inception in the mid-1990s, the municipal inland wetland training program has successfully reached a high percentage of inland wetland commission members across the state. In the first year of the training program, 423 participants representing 101 (or roughly 59%) of Connecticut's municipal inland wetland agencies attended the Wetland Commissioners Training Program and participated in at least one segment of the training program.

In addition to the initial WPDG, the DEP applied for and received subsequent grants to continue and enhance the training program. With support from these grants, Connecticut's DEP developed a brochure entitled *Agriculture... Forestry... and Wetlands Protection in Connecticut*; developed curriculum and guidance materials related to 2003 and 2004 statutory amendments to Connecticut's Inland Wetlands and Watercourses Act; and revised and updated the general regulation guidance provided to each municipal inland wetland agency. An interactive, 90-minute training DVD on the 'basics' of the Inland Wetlands and Watercourses Act was released in December 2005 and provides another helpful resource.

WPDGs have allowed the state to create a standardized wetland regulatory training program for its municipal inland wetland agencies. The grants also gave the CT DEP an opportunity to instill state-wide consistency in wetland regulation, to the greatest degree feasible. The training program serves as an excellent outreach and education vehicle.

Current Work and Future Plans

In 2005, Connecticut's DEP was awarded an Environmental Outcome Wetland Demonstration Pilot (WDP) grant to publish a Wetlands Status and Trends Report for the state. The charts, graphs and figures of the report will show results of the Statewide Inland Wetlands and Watercourses Activity Program, which tracks wetland acreage losses and gains. The DEP plans to implement the Municipal Inlands Wetlands Commissioners Training Program and publish the summary reports for 2002 and 2003. The training materials will continue to build municipal inland wetland programs and educate commissioners so that there can be increased protection of vulnerable wetlands in a consistent manner throughout the state.

For more information about Connecticut's Department of Environmental Protection Inland Wetlands Program, please visit the CT DEP website (<http://www.dep.state.ct.us/wtr/wetlands/inlandwetlandsindex.htm>).

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